THEORIES OF CHARACTERIZATION IN COMMENTARIES ON TERENCE BEFORE 1600

BY

EDWIN WINSLOW ROBBINS

A. B., University of Kansas City, 1940

A. M., University of Illinois, 1941

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1948

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The principal purpose of this study has been to examine that body of commentary which appeared in editions of Terence published before 1600 in order to determine what ideas on dramatic characterization were there advanced. Because of the high position accorded Terence in the grammar school curricula of Sixteenth Century England, it may reasonably be expected that whatever concepts of character prevailed in the interpretation and teaching of Terence (and most of the editors of Terence were pedagogs) will have carried over into the writing of English drama. But since the commentators were not professional playwrights and were not making it their business to give instructions in the writing or production of plays, their commentaries do not constitute manuals on the technique of dramaturgy in any but a very general sense. In carrying out their primary purpose of examining literature for its meaning and humanistic value, these early pedagogs often indirectly provided instruction for the student who sought to write plays in imitation of Terence; for in seeking to point out the beauties of the poet and to analyze his artistic process, they instilled in their readers a set of general critical concepts which they could follow in their own practice. The degree to which these concepts were employed and the specific way in which they were embodied in vernacular drama of course depended upon and varied with the individual creative artist; however, the specific way in which these Terentian concepts were so used is reserved for discussion in a later study.

As a preliminary to such analysis, the present examination has been limited to the following general divisions of comment upon dramatic characterization in editions of Terence: the definition of comedy as a controlling factor in portrayal of

character, the moral utility of comedy as another controlling factor, the doctrine of decorum as a rule of dramatic practice, the character types which constituted the "material" of Terentian comedy, the tendency toward individualization of character within those types, and the interrelationship between character and plot.

These several aspects of characterization all proceed ultimately from classical theory as stated in the rhetorical theories of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, the aesthetic rules of Horace, and the ethical systems of a host of ancient authorities. Along with those sources, the Renaissance inherited the medieval interpretations of Diomedes, Donatus, and Servius. Donatus, in particular, was of the greatest importance, for his commentary on five of the six extant plays of Terence was the basis of all subsequent analyses of the comedies. From these various traditional sets of theory the following Renaissance commentators constructed their remarks on characterization: Juvenalis, Badius, Marsus, Philologus, Faustus, Melanchthon, Latomus, Rivius, Barlandus, Stigelius, Bernt, Crucigerus, Misenus, Willichius, Menenius, Camerarius, Theodoricus, Cordatus, and Chytraeus. Not all of them chose to deal with the same aspects of characterization, but when their several approaches are considered as a whole—and in the Sixteenth Century they were thus consolidated in the great encyclopedic editions such as that printed at Paris in 1552—it becomes apparent that the young dramatist writing in imitation of Terence had at his disposal a considerable body of theory by which to govern his practice.

One very basic concept which the Renaissance dramatist would have learned from his study of Terence was the classic definition of comedy, which is important in a consideration of characterization because it determines to a considerable degree the kind of character a Terentian imitator could draw and the way he could portray him. For example, since comedy was regarded as a dramatic form which was realistic

in the sense that it represented everyday occurrences in the lives of ordinary citizens, fantasy was precluded. Even though comedy by definition dealt with fictitious characters, those characters had to be verisimilar if comedy was to be an "imitation of life, mirror of custom, and image of truth." Comedy dealt with average people struggling with problems in the area most important to them—namely, their own family circles. Hence, the Renaissance dramatist was not encouraged by his study of Terence to introduce aristocracy into his comedy. He could find much more precedent for the use of low characters, for the classical definitions include *humiles personae* along with average citizens, and Terentian practice includes slaves and parasites, who were certainly considered low characters.

In comedy, such conflicts as were involved were not matters of life and death. That choice of alternatives was in the province of tragedy. The comic decision hinged rather upon prudence, involving a choice between proper and improper behaviour. Accordingly, the kind of emotional frenzy that characterized a tragic character in the throes of making a fatal decision could not be imparted to a comic character, whose indecision had to involve *ethos* rather than *pathos* and represented a sort of rhetorical juggling act to provide amusement until an unexpected denouement could be provided to show that he need never have worried in the first place. And the outcome of the initial turbulence in comedy was always pleasant. Individual desires were satisfied, and at the same time the general principles of morality were kept intact. Of course, as often as not it was lucky accident, blind circumstance, that provided the comic catastrophe. The individual's conflict between selfish interest and general morality was never resolved by a decision of the individual himself. He merely hovered between the alternatives until circumstance intervened to break the stalemate. To be sure, the plot-formula used in analysing Terence called for a crucial decision at the end of Act II to bring about an open conflict

between opposing forces, but that decision was largely a mechanical one, representing not a resolution of intellectual indecision but rather a choice between two alternative actions. Had individual decision been crucial to the outcome of a comedy, a character's *affectus*, or passions, might have become involved, with the *pathos* of tragedy resulting.

It follows, then, that the dramatist modeling upon Terence could show little development of character within the scope of one play. About the most he could express was the alternation between joy and dismay which characterized the successive stages of the plot, and the contrast between the initial unhappiness and final joy of all characters. The violent feelings were not sufficiently involved to produce much evolution of character. Since the emphasis was upon intrigue, involving conflict of action rather than emotions, no person was required to undergo enough psychological stress to bring about change in character.

One aspect of the classical definitions of comedy upon which the Renaissance especially capitalized was its usefulness as a tool for inculcating virtue. Donatus' statement that from comedy "is learned what in life is useful, and what, on the other hand, is to be avoided" was considerably amplified by later commentators to serve their heavily didactic purposes. Each plot was interpreted as a conflict between two specific kinds of prudence and imprudence, and a central moral was often stated for each scene. Individual lines were examined in great detail for their sententious value and every *sententia* was reinforced with Christian as well as pagan authority. The schoolboy of the Renaissance was thus taught to regard the characters in Terence not as human individuals but as dramatic symbols of right and wrong, whose every speech was loaded with revelations of adherence to or deviation from acceptable modes of behavior.

There seems to be little essential difference, in other words, between these characters of Terence, as the schoolmasters represented them, and the more crudely conceived virtues

and vices of the morality plays. The general Terentian pattern of conflict between two opposing modes of behavior reflecting prudence and imprudence is applied to the Christian framework of thought in the morality play to produce a play of struggle between the forces of good and evil competing for possession of man's soul. The implications are of course much graver in the morality play, for there spiritual life and death are the alternative outcomes of the central conflict. The Roman comedy, in its preoccupation with practical considerations of conduct, steers clear of tragic suggestions. But because of its essentially expository form, it lent itself readily to the didactic purposes of the Reformation.

In the portrayal of such characters as he elected to use, the Renaissance imitator of Terence would attempt to give a faithful portrayal of life as it is, to fashion his characters in the image of their human prototypes. Thus would he be observing the soverign rule of decorum or propriety. The commentators not only provided him with full statements on the general theory derived from Aristotle and Horace but also translated the generality into a working formula by drawing up a list of the various ways in which this decorum might be observed. From the specific categories listed by Aristotle and Horace and the attributes of character given by Cicero in *De Inventione*, they established the following factors as necessary considerations in the maintenance of decorum: ancestry, nationality, age, sex, upbringing, bodily nature (innate and acquired), mental nature (innate and acquired), fortune or social position ("wealth, neighbors, friends, clients, prestige, public honors, and their contraries"), occupation, intellectual pursuits and interests, affectation (that which one claims to be or wishes to be regarded as being), experiences and remarks (past, present, and future), emotions, plans, and name. Working with these attributes, a dramatist could achieve his characterization in accord with decorum. He would not of course catalog all these factors for every character; the traits he chose to draw for a given character would be gov-

erned by other dramatic considerations.

But decorum, even as Cicero described it, was of two kinds, philosophic and poetic, and the Renaissance critics fused the two in their analysis of specific Terentian plays. Hence, the Terentian imitator, in striving to adhere to the guiding principle of decorum, no doubt would have had in mind both meanings of the term. He would have made his characters behave in the world of art as they would behave in the world of reality; but whenever that behavior was indecorous, when it did not measure up to the philosophers' notions of what is seemly for man to do, then he would have made that unseemliness clear in such fashion as would enable his readers to see its folly and avoid it in their own actions.

In the course of their analysis of the specific attributes of decorum, the Renaissance commentators noted two aspects of characterization. Since Terentian characters are typed (in accord with the traditionally defined nature of New Comedy), observing decorum in the portrayal of such characters involved fidelity to the characteristics of their types; and the commentators gave considerable space to a recapitulation of these characteristics. At the same time, they saw traces of individualization in the dramatist's portraiture; and so the observance of decorum sometimes also meant to them the faithful delineation of such characteristics as would differentiate two characters belonging to the same type. Thus the final pattern of characterization was a compound of those factors making for individualization and those tending toward the creation of typical charecters. In the fusion of the two, perhaps, lies part of the greatness of Elizabethan drama with its universalized individuals.

Of the various Terentian character types, the most important were the youth, his elderly father, and the slave who helped the youth gain his objective. Since every play portrays a young man seeking to conduct his amours in defiance of his father's wishes, these principal characters are the constant

elements in the *dramatis personae*. The chief plotters in these Terentian battles of rhetoric are the old men and the slaves. The youth, because he is typically demented by the power of love, is forced to rely upon the planning of his slave, and hence is caught between the two chief intriguers as the focal point of all the activity.

If the Terentian imitator chose to use the very same types that he had found in Terence, he would choose from among those three major types and in addition from among the several minor types which occur in Terentian plays: the *miles gloriosus,* the parasite, the pander, the courtesan, the nurse, the midwife, the maidservant, the matron, and the old crone. The characteristics of these types were familiar to every student of Terence.

The same model who furnished the Renaissance dramatist with those specific types also provided him with the hints which could lead him to greater individualization in his portrayal of character. If he read carefully or his schoolmaster followed the line of the commentaries in elucidating Terence, the young dramatist would have learned that Terence portrayed no two characters alike. And he would have learned further that the poet's chief method of differentiating between two characters was contrast based upon difference in degree: one old man is more avaricious than the other, one youth is more impetuous than another, one slave is shrewder than another, and so forth. And the same contrast was used between individuals belonging to different types. An old man's ugliness is mentioned to emphasize a young girl's beauty, a young man's timidity accentuates his father's ferocity, and a courtesan's fearlessness makes the cowardice of Thraso seem even greater and more ridiculous. Once impressed with this method of differentiation, the Terentian imitator could carry the example of his model as far as he chose, within the limits of course of the various other controlling factors in characterization.

A final aspect of characterization which this Renaissance dramatist certainly could have been expected to reflect is the subordination of character to plot as he found it exemplified in Terentian comedy and explained in the commentaries or by his schoolmaster. He would have learned to assign to every character a moral purpose contributory to the central purpose of the play as a whole, and to give every trait, action, and speech of every character a function within the total plot. Thus instructed, he would in theory at least have been able to write an extremely well-knit play of intrigue.

The foregoing concepts of characterization constitute the influence which Terentian study in the Renaissance very probably exercised upon the minds of those dramatists who sat down to write comedy in imitation of their classical model. The extent to which they slavishly abided by these precepts, transcended them, or ennobled them in the use is reserved for later treatment. Before a final analysis can be made of characterization in Elizabethan drama, however, the remaining elements in the classical education of the Renaissance must be examined for whatever light they may shed upon the body of Terentian commentary. Also, the Renaissance drama written in Latin and Greek and particularly the Christian-Terence plays of the continent need to be fitted into the total picture of the evolution of characterization from classical model to vernacular imitation.

When this total literary background has been drawn in all its complexity, it should not be forgotten that artistry is made up of much more than literary influence, that many irrecoverable factors of non-literary experience have contributed to the making of a Shakspere. With that obvious but sometimes neglected fact in mind, the literary critic can yet explain much of the art of theRenaissance dramatist. And in his evaluation of the evolution of characterization, the various concepts advanced in the commentaries on Terence undoubtedly will loom large.

VITA

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